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'What Apparition Did He See?': Imagist Sensibilities in the Poetry of Jibanananda Das

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Abstract
This article aims to study the influence of the tenets of the Imagist movement in Europe on the poetry of the vernacular poet Jibanananda Das. The Imagist movement in English literature, led by Ezra Pound, can be equated with similar sentiments shared around the Bengali literary magazine *Kabita* with contributors such as Buddhadeva Bose, Jibanananda Das, Amiya Chakraborty, and Sudhindranath Dutt. The guidelines defined by the Imagists regarding brevity and precision of images, the importance of musicality in the creation of rhythm, and the frequent use of foreign texts influenced several significant Bengali poets in the twentieth century. In the same way that Pound and the Imagists in general moved away from the emotional excesses of the Romantics (Shelley) and the Victorians (Tennyson), modern Bengali poets of the period, such as Jibanananda and Buddhadeva Bose, tried to construct a poetic language away from the legacy of Tagore. Beginning with a short introduction to the culture of literary influence, the article will move on to discuss the salient features of Imagism, followed by its reception by the then-Bengali poets. The final part of the article will explore the sensibilities in Jibanananda Das's poetry and its unique location as regards the Imagist experience.

Keywords: Jibanananda Das, Imagism, 20th century, Bengali poetry, influence

Introduction

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) was a Bengali poet, writer, novelist, and essayist in the Bengali language. He has emerged as one of the greatest Bengali poets after Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam in West Bengal and Bangladesh. A group of Bengali poets-

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Sudhindranath Dutt, Buddhadeva Bose, Amiya Chakraborty, and Bishnu Dey, who wrote between the 1930s and the 1950s, were inspired by Western literary modernism and its various offshoots. Jibanananda Das, a lecturer in English, was the prominent of this group. He created a new poetic voice in Vernacular Literature where the natural beauty of the rural landscape of Bengal co-exists with his poetic sensibilities and the urban realities of the city of Kolkata. He affectionately addresses rural Bengal as 'Bengal, the Beautiful" and the city of Kolkata as "Kallolini Tillotama" (sonorous feminine beauty). His particular style of uneven rhythm, startling metaphors, and unique images have influenced generations of Bengali poets such as "the Krittibas" and "Hungry Generation" poets. His major volumes of poetry include Dhusar PandulipI/Grey Manuscripts, Bonolota Sen, Satti Tarar Timir (The Darkness of the Seven Stars), Mahaprithibi (The Wide World), and Bengal The Beautiful (Rupashi Bangla) (published Posthumously).

In the context of the great range and variety of literary movements and schools that emerged from the 18th century onwards are found, in one way or another, in the literature of different parts of the world; 'world literature' as such is characterized by influential cross-currents of thoughts ranging from Romanticism to postmodernism and their unique defining influences on and through literary stalwarts. Romanticism, for example, was brought to Germany through Schiller, to England through Shelley, to France through Hugo, and to Russia through Pushkin within the 19th century (Wellek, qtd in Enani 24) and came to take its course in the respective literary geographies. Speaking of Bengali poetry, its chronological narrative has always faithfully mirrored its Western counterpart – classical, Romantic, and modernist. In the twentieth century, a decisive desire to stand apart from the Tagorean tradition stirred the poets of the Kallol era such as Buddhadeva Bose (1908-1974), Sudhindranath Dutt (1901-1960), Amiya Chakraborty (1901-1986), Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) and Bishnu Dey (1909-1982) – poets who, well-versed in the canons of Western literature, ushered in modernism and its various offshoots such as Symbolism, Surrealism and Imagism into the spectrum of Bengali poetry (Mitra 39, 45, 53). In Jibanananda Das, however, the then cult of influence takes on an altogether unique aspect; as a poet who occupied a certain strange no-man's-land in the given scenario, Jibanananda successfully used several techniques to usher in a new form and diction into Bengali poetry while not being imitative. The discovery of a different poetic discourse in European literature, beginning from *Dhusar Pandulipi* (*The Grey Manuscripts*, 1936), helped him to destabilize the prevailing canons of Bengali poetry and construct a new discourse as a pioneer of the new poetry in his language.

'Whirl Up, Sea': The Rise and Development of Imagism

Beginning in London in 1909, the Imagist movement led by Pound seemed to spearhead what Graham Hough calls "the English cell of an almost world-wide poetic conspiracy", which was busy hatching "the first plot against the literary establishment for over a hundred years" (4). With four annual anthologies (1914-17), a detailed manifesto in 1915, and a fifth anthology in 1930, there were only seven poets intimately associated with the movement – four Americans (Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle or H.D., John Gould Fletcher and Amy Lowell) and three British (Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint and D.H. Lawrence). T.S. Eliot, while never an orthodox Imagist, was a close associate of Pound and took naturally to some of the theories of Imagism while simultaneously developing them along his lines. The focus, Imagism asserted, was not on content but on presenting conflicting and disparate images:

The symbolist's *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The Imagist's images have a variable significance like the signs a, b, and x in algebra… the author must use his *image* because he sees it or feels it, *not* because he thinks he can use it

to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics. (Pound, qtd. in *Imagist Poetry* 21).

Examples of such focus, too, are available from the Imagists themselves and are often significantly self-explanatory. In his poem "In a Station of the Metro," Ezra Pound juxtaposes his impression of the sea of faces that pass before him in a metro station with a visual image of "Petals on a wet, black bough" (2). In so doing, he necessarily directs our attention to how we should view the former scene as an *image* seen and presented by him and the significance of variability in vision.

The first statements on the policy of the Imagist movement are found in "Imagisme" by F.S. Flint and "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" by Ezra Pound, in which he defines the 'Image' as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (qtd. in *Imagist Poetry* 130). Flint's note on Imagism includes three rules: direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective; to use no word that did not contribute to the presentation and last regarding rhythm; to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome (qtd. in *Imagist Poetry* 129). A look at one of the finest Imagist poems will help towards a definition. H.D.'s "Oread" appeared in *Some Imagist Poets* (1915) and was referred to by Pound as the ultimate in Imagism:

Whirl up, sea –
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

Pound had defined the Image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (130). The admission of the subconscious element is frequent in Pound's attempt at a definition of the Image. Of his own "Metro" poem, he had written that it was "the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, darts into a thing inwards and subjective" (qtd. in *Imagist Poetry* 40). There are no similes in the Imagists' poems, no symbols, but an emphasis on presentation rather than representation, no moralizing tone, no reflection on human experience, no striving for the spiritual, no fixed meter or rhyme, but a rhythm organic to the image itself. It is not forced to take upon itself a fixed shape, except that of the image in isolation, ecstatically held.

While the movement, like any other literary and/or movement, was riddled by its paradoxes, Imagism's significance lies in the fact that the tenets that it extolled came to have a decisive impact on the anti-Romantic vein in modernist poetry written from about 1914 – the year in which the first anthology of Imagist verse was published by Ezra Pound. It cannot be denied that much, if not most, of the poetry written since then has reflected many qualities that the Imagists admired in a poem. The trend that the Imagists set would eventually find its way into Bengal, where, interestingly enough, a handful of poets were trying to free themselves from the Tagorean tradition that then dominated the scenario of twentieth-century Bengali poetry.

'In A Crowd of a Thousand Faces': Bengali Poetry, Imagism, and Jibanananda

For some of the Bengali poets influenced by the Imagist movement in England, their proximity to Imagist poetry led indirectly to an association with the French Symbolist poets. This is because many features of Imagist poetry, such as the portrayal of city life, have been inspired by the Symbolists. The use of images by the Symbolists has been an inspiration, and poems such as Jibanananda's "Hawar Raat" ("Night of the Wind") and "Ghaas" ("Grass"),

Amiya Chakraborty's "Binimoy" ("The Exchange"), Bishnu Dey's "Samudrarekha" ("The Sealine"), and Buddhadeva Bose's "Chilka-r Sakal" ("Morning at Chilka") are notable examples in this case.

Juxtaposition or dissimilar comparisons of two experiences or emotions have been an influence on the Imagist movement among Bengali poets, for example, in Bishnu Dey's "Chattisgarhi Gaan" ("A Chhattisgarhi Song"):

You are matchless, white oleander,
Rare in a crowd of a thousand faces. (31-32)

The direct influence of Ezra Pound's "In A Station of the Metro" in these particular lines is altogether unmissable. The other features of Imagist poetry reflected in modern Bengali poetry are the use of irony and the effort to move away from the conventional use of rhythm and words. The emphasis was on the use of the spoken word and rhyming pattern of speech. This may be found in Bishnu Dey's "Janmashtami":

The beggar heart trembles with fear,
O victorious,
-Remember, just tea, no milk, two spoonfuls of sugar- (244-46)

The irony and novel rhyming pattern and use of language is noticeable. The use of direct references to other texts and political personalities (intertextuality) is an Imagist trait used by Bengali poets. This exercise removes all geographical, historical, and cultural barriers. Bishnu Dey, taking after Eliot, often begins his poems with a few lines from another poem, for example with the closing lines from William Wordsworth's "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" in his "Lucia, Prakriti, Amra" ("Lucia, Nature, and Us"). Buddhadeva Bose has used the Draupadi and Damayanti myths, as has Jibanananda, the Behula-Lakhindar myth, and the myth of the Keshavati Kanya. Bishnu Dey uses Cassandra, Cressida, and Helen from the Iliad. We find Jibanananda Das' lines – "Nachiketa, Zarathustra, Lao-Tse, Angelo, Rousseau and Lenin" in "Samayer Kachhe" ("To Time", 40) from *Saat-ti Tarar Timir* (*The Darkness of Seven* Stars, 1948) echoing the sentiment. In the use of references to Goethe, Hölderlin, Rilke, and Thomas Mann in Sudhindranath Dutt's "Sangbarta" ("Rain-Clouds"), diversity is aimed at evoking a central emotional response. It must be remembered that the Imagist and the Symbolist movements, in their emphasis on the use of images, were influenced by the metaphysical poems of the 17th century. Another similarity between the Imagist and Bengali poets is the regarding poetic theory and literary criticism: in this regard, Sudhindranath Dutt's *Swagata* (*To Oneself*, 1938) Buddhadeva Bose's *Kaler Putul* (*The Dolls of Time*, 1946) and *Sahitya Charcha* (*Literary Exercise,* 1954), and Jibanananda Das' *Kabitar Katha* (*Of Poetry*, 1962) follow the example.

'The Pitiful Flesh of An Ice-Cold Orange': Jibanananda and the Imagist Experience

Jibanananda, in his Preface to *Shreshtha Kabita* (*Selected* Poems, 1954), has mentioned that his poems cannot be categorized as belonging to a single literary movement – Imagism, Surrealism, or Symbolism. However, his poems belong to all such and not exclusively to one; poems such as "Kamalalebu" ("The Orange"), "Beral" ("The Cat") and "Ghaas" ("Grass") conform to the Imagist approach – they are concise and mark a sharp, crisp and direct treatment of the subject. The description of the cat in "The Cat" and its activities cannot be deemed, in the strictest sense, to have any meaning beyond the immediate. The diction is colloquial, and there is a distinct avoidance of any ornamentation. In "The Orange", the 'ice-cold' orange emerges as an object described in minimal yet accurate terms; The grass in "Grass" in "soft green light" captivates the reader with a minimalist yet powerful description and a direct treatment of the object. In "Subinay Mustaphi" and "Hajar Bochhor Shudhu Khela

Kore" ("A Thousand Years Only Play") we find conformity with the suggestions laid down by Ezra Pound in "A Few Don'ts" in respect of the direct treatment of the object or thing, colloquial language, conciseness and avoidance of ornamentation.

Jibanananda had created a new genre in Bengali poetry using novel images, which had, at one point in time, made Tagore compliment his poem "Mrityur Aage" ("Before Death") as "chitrarupamay" ("just like a picture"). On paying greater critical attention to the above experience, we often find that such images override one another. For example, a line from Jibanananda, "The kite wipes off the scent of sunlight from its wings" ("Banalata Sen" 14, trans. Chaudhuri) involves more than one sensory perception – visual, olfactory, and speed. Therefore, we can study the images as descriptive, idiomatic, or mixed in the context of Jibanananda. Descriptive images are when sound is used to create an image of reality – "She washes her feet once, silently; and then is lost/In the distant mist" ("Tomra Jekhane Sadh" 12-13, trans. Chaudhuri). Here, the description resembles a picture, and a mood of sorrow is created. Similarly, "Persian carpets, Cashmere shawls, flawless pearls and corals from Bering waters" ("Nogno Nirjan Haath" 15, trans. Haldar) as a picture conveys a historical sense and an image of luxurious Middle Eastern affluence. The second category is idiomatic imagery or imagery based on similarity. For example, through a comparison of two objects, several images are presented in which not only the objects but also their surroundings as well. A typical example would be "a certain silence/Like a camel's neck" ("Aat Bochhor Aager Ekdin" 21-22, trans. Chaudhuri). Here, the desert and the undulating cold neck of the camel are also presented. Also, the much-discussed eyes of Banalata Sen are compared to a bird's nest. There are countless other examples – "A car goes past, coughing like a lout" ("Ratri" 4, trans. Chakravorty), "Tram-tracks stretching underfoot, like so many primordial serpent sisters" ("Footpath-e" 5, trans. Majumdar). New words are also created in the process, which explores a world of visual possibilities – vulture-bride, grass-mother, unresponsive footpath, rude sunlight. The third category is slightly complicated as the comparison is not very clear and involves a historic sense on the part of the reader. For example, to appreciate a "face like the sculpture of Sravasti", one has to know the historical perspective of Sravasti. The images of Jibanananda can be best understood and appreciated after following Ezra Pound's observation, "An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (qtd. in *Imagist Poetry* 130).

The Imagist representation of the city as lifeless and its inhabitants as disillusioned and depressed owes its origins to Baudelaire's (in particular, and the Symbolists' in general) portrayal of city life. While this had a lasting impact on the situatedly urban *Kallol* poets, in Jibanananda this aspect finds its profoundest expression: the city life of Kolkata, Tokyo Delhi, and Moscow in all its lifelessness and mechanical dependence is portrayed in "Charidike Prokritir" ("Everywhere Nature's"); on the other hand, night-time Kolkata finds its grotesque realization in "Ratri" ("Night"). Finally, in some poems, the images are used by Jibanananda as the language of his poetry; in the poem "Pecha" ("The Owl"), for example, he uses the image of autumn to articulate the decaying modern society:

In the breath of the autumn river
The chill comes
To the bamboo leaves – the dead grass – the stars of the sky!
The icy moon sends forth a fountain!" (Trans A Certain Sense 4-7)

This is undoubtedly an Imagist trait where images, far from being ornaments, themselves become the poetry, the speech.

Conclusion

When employed with precision, words become transparent lenses through which the realities of the world are perceived and understood. The hallmark of the Imagist movement—marked by minimalism, brevity, and an economy of expression—revolutionized modern poetry by discarding ornamental excess and embracing linguistic precision. This stylistic shift, characterized by the use of everyday speech and the rejection of inflated poetic diction and rigid metrical constraints, sought to capture the natural rhythms and intonations of human language rather than the artificial cadences of conventional verse. This influence did not remain confined to Western literary traditions. It found resonance in the Bengali poetic landscape, where poets like Jibanananda Das reimagined poetic form and voice. His innovative departures from traditional norms and his embrace of a modernist sensibility position his work both within and beyond his historical moment. Jibanananda's poetry, thus, becomes a distinct site where the Imagist ethos—concise, evocative, and unadorned—finds a powerful and localized expression.

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